

Scott Eckern

Honored Alumni Interview

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INTERVIEWER: We're here with Scott Eckern, Artistic Director, and former Managing Director.

ECKERN: Actually, General Manager. But those titles don't mean much. We just make them up. It is interesting, a General Manager in the commercial world deals with all the finances and contracts and things like that. But in our world, I just created it and that was the title. But now I am the Artistic Director.

INTERVIEWER: When you were talking about it yesterday it seemed like you were doing a lot of the things that we would normally see with a general manager, or a CEO.

ECKERN: That is right. And actually that is why Artistic Director and Chief Operating Officer is an unusual combination. The Executive Producer is the Chief Executive Officer in our company. In different musical theatres sometimes the Artistic Director is number one, sometimes they are number two. It just depends on the dynamic of the company.

In this case the Executive Producer is the son of one of the co-founders, but he happened to move up in the world and so forth and he just finished his fortieth season. We are close in age, but he grew up in that theatre. He deals with the budgets and the financial aspects of it. He does a lot of the bookings and negotiates the bookings of the tours, but then I deal with all the personnel issues, all of the creating the systems.

Before I was there we did not have things like retirement, health benefits, employee evaluations, or even a handbook. I wrote the handbook; I put in the systems for retirement. And it is unusual. In fact, I was even told once that I am not eccentric enough to be an Artistic Director, but my predecessor said, "You really get into this management stuff." And I said, "Yeah."

I think what has happened as a result is that it has developed my philosophy that everything we do, *everything* that we do, has an influence on what happens on the stage. Everything. Therefore, the person that works in accounting has an understanding that what they do makes a difference. It is all integrated. Therefore, we pay attention. So it is important to me that the full-time staff is taken care of. I look out for them because in the theatre it is very easy to discount – sometimes actors are discounted – so the job is to make sure everyone is paid attention to, that they are encouraged. Ultimately, my job is to help others do their best. That is my job.

INTERVIEWER: What websites and publications do you recommend for those interested in the field?

ECKERN: I go to BroadwayStars.com just to read about what is going on in New York and in the regions. What it does is give you listings everyday of articles from *Playbill*, sometimes from newspapers in the country, reviews of shows that are happening in prominent theatres throughout the country, as well as New York, and all the New York reviews end up there. That way you don't have to go to all these separate websites for papers and so forth. You go to one place and that really gives you the best cross-section of what is going on in the theatre industry.

Then there's another thing, an Arts Journal that's free that you can subscribe to, you can subscribe to the premium part of it but that is not really essential. That gives you articles – throughout Great Britain, as well as the United States, and sometimes Australia, -- about music, media, theatre, and people in the arts. It is really good because it does not just get newspaper articles, although most of it is, but it will sometimes have journal or magazine articles. There is stuff everyday, and it covers all the arts, and that is why I like that as well, because you can see articles like "Conductor quits after bad review" and other things like that. Those are the two that stood out in my mind.

There is also a book TCG (Theatre Communications Group) put out called *The Art of Governance* which is fantastic when you are dealing in the non-profit theatre world. It is edited by TCG and there are articles by different people in the non-profit theatre world.

INTERVIEWER: Your theatre is also a TCG member?

ECKERN: We are not. TCG mostly covers theatres that do not really do musicals, per say. But they are just starting to move in that direction; Goodspeed Musicals is a member of TCG because they are a LORT (The League of Resident Theatres) Theatre, they work under LORT contract, a lot of them are that.

But we can only afford to belong to so many organizations. We are co-founders of the National Alliance for Musical Theatre, which has, I think, over one-hundred and twenty members, theatres and producers; we are also members of the IPN, which is the Independent Presenters Network; and then we are also members of the League of American Theatres and Producers. Our CEO is a Tony voter, which creates some of the influence we have there. And you know, the membership is all based on budget.

INTERVIEWER: And every one of those is based on budget?

ECKERN: The IPN is the least expensive because it gets really a consortium of theatres, like ours, that book tours. What they wanted to do is try to have a little more control over the product that is out on the road.

It was during *Thoroughly Modern Millie* we became investors through the IPN, so now on all these lists of producers it will say, "Independent Presenters' Network." Thus, we have a little tiny piece of the Tony award for *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. When we presented the tour, the lead producer came and presented us with the Tony Award on stage, which was really cool.

I happened to be at the Tony Awards that year, and I was on the isle. I could have gone up – you know, everyone goes up – I could have gone up but I thought, "I am going to get to the stairs and someone will say, 'No, you can't come up here.' And it would be on national television." So, I went to the party.

INTERVIEWER: What do you consider must hearing, reading, or seeing in the field?

ECKERN: In my mind it is not so much technical knowledge as it is mindset. The things that have been most effective for me, in what I have done have been Steven R. Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and his new book *The 8th Habit*.

The best book I ever read about directing was *As a Man Thinketh*, and that was in a class on directing here at BYU. There's another book, if you are interested in running a non-profit theatre, *Managing in the Twenty-First Century*, and it talks about those kinds of things.

Those are all ways of how to look at "things" as opposed to "nuts and bolts." There are nuts and bolts books out there, but for me, it is more important to know how to lead to the things that resonate with me that then influence the choices that I then make, and how to work with other people. It again maximizes their best work.

INTERVIEWER: Are there any performances or companies that you feel like someone who wants to go into this field should see?

ECKERN: Actually, there are two things. One is to see as much professional live theatre as possible. Now, when you are on a budget, there are different ways to do that, for example, video tape or DVD. Also, you can learn a lot from university productions and from other performing groups as well. I don't say just go to live theatre, go to concerts. Go to a wide range of things because they all influence it.

But as far as theatre, if you can see things in New York, see things in New York. See the shows that are on the road. The producers strive to make sure the tour experience is the same as the Broadway experience. And they are pretty good. Cameron Mackintosh set the standard for that. When he put *Phantom* out there he said, "I am not going to put *Phantom of the Opera* on the road unless it can be what it is in New York or in London." So, that is important.

As far as specific theatres to focus on I think that when you go to BroadwayStars.com and you read some of the articles, reviews and so forth you get a sense. Center Theatre Group is doing great work and it is different because they have a new artistic director there, Michael Ritchie who replaced Gordon Davidson. They have a different focus. And ACT (American Conservatory Theatre) in San Francisco is still strong in what they do.

There are so many theatres now, all over the country. That is another thing, if you want to be an actor, director, designer, choreographer, or go into management or work as a stage hand and so forth, there is work in Seattle, and Denver, and St.

Louis and in the middle of the country. It is all over. So the regions are becoming more prominent in the consciousness of the theatre industry.

INTERVIEWER: In other words, if a student is going into this area, they really need to know what theatre is available in the area where they happen to be.

ECKERN: Absolutely. Or within a certain mile radius, because there are community theatres that have professional staff and then the all the actors and so forth are volunteers. There are many ways in which you can have a career in this industry and there is not any one path.

INTERVIEWER: What advise would you give to an up-and-coming student in this area, particularly regarding achieving success in the professional world?

ECKERN: I alluded to it and made a lot of comments about it in my talk, but I as I have had the opportunity to hire people and watch them work on stage and off stage, it sometimes comes down to the very basic things. Have a good work ethic, be prepared, and pay attention to detail, which also means being a good listener.

I have had actors or directors come to me and say, "They are just lazy – in their two-week rehearsal they do not know their lines. They are professionals?" They are equity contracted professionals. I have musicians in the pit, I give them the book in advance, two weeks, three weeks, four weeks in advance, they come and show up the first day of the reading and they have not looked at the book. They are professionals. I have negotiated huge contracts for these people. Do your homework. Work hard, have a good work ethic, pay attention to details, do your homework. It shows through in your work. Just being there on time is part of the work ethic. Those are just the basics.

That is what you have to do in school too. It does not change. Sometimes I think what happens is you say you will get it when you are out of school or, when you are getting paid. But if you don't have it now you will not later.

That is why I did things without pay. There was a television producer years ago whose daughter was a student of mine when I was at the university. He came in, this huge television writer and producer, one of the most prolific at the time on TV, and he said, "There is work for you to do if you are willing to do the work. But you have got to be willing to do the work."

It is not about the glamour of it – there is glamour – but there is hard work. Buddy gave the example of a guy who was a go-for and he really was great at getting coffee. And he said, "You know, this guy is pretty sharp. Let's give him this project." Then he did that project. Then he would do the next project, and then he became an executive producer. Those stories do happen.

Essentially that is what happened to me. Though I had an assignment to run an internship program, I got coffee. I did all the other things and just was there. I would be standing next to the director and say, "Do you need a cup of coffee?" And I would go get it. That is paying attention to details. Those are the things.

Also be patient. It does not all happen at once. It is one step at a time.

INTERVIEWER: How have you felt about your career?

ECKERN: Like anything it has its ups and its downs. Sometimes I have felt like asking, "How did I get here? How did I get in this place?"

It occurs to me that when I was interviewed by the press, when we announced the transition and that I was going to be the Artistic Director, a story was done on me, on the season, my predecessor's last season, and looking to the future. I at that time felt like we would continue to do what we do, but over time, I have taken on my sensibilities and I feel like now, as I just finished my fifth season as Artistic Director, I have gradually took on those responsibilities.

My predecessor had announced his retirement five years before he retired. He so wanted to retire, so he just kept turning things over and then he started directing again and I started giving him notes. He directed for us after he retired, and now he is retired completely. Like I told the reporter, it would become more my sensibilities over time and as I look at the last five

years I think, "There is more of me." The time is invested and I have matured, which allows me to be confident in the choices that I make.

Sometimes I feel like I have gone to a place in my career now where I am confident in the choices I make and I will stand by them. If I make a mistake, fine. I will admit it and move on. If it was successful, it was to everyone else's credit. But there are times where you just have to say, "This is what we are going to do" and not fret over it, just do it. But it has taken all those years to get to a place and be in a position where if I say this is what we are going to do, everyone says okay let's go.

When you have a great show or a great season you think, "I have got to do this again" so you never have arrived. That is the other thing about it; you always have to move forward, you are only as good as your last production. So you have to keep going.

INTERVIEWER: What has brought you the most happiness and the most frustration?

ECKERN: Well, the thing I think I find the most satisfaction in, in what I'm doing now is that I get to be a part of other people's growth and success.

In our summer season, you do two weeks rehearsal and one week of a run. You get people, who this is how they make their living as directors or actors, and they go all over the place. Some prominent people, Tony Award winners, say, "We have heard great things about your theatre. We would like to come there. Do you have something for me?" Sometimes we audition them; sometimes we do not need to.

I like the experience we have had with people who have gotten their Union Card in our theatre, their first key union professional contract, and then seeing them move forward and get a Broadway show, and be nominated for a Tony and to get a Tony. I have been there when friends have received an award, and it is great to be there to cheer them on and support them. We were part of their experiences. We did not make it happen for them, but it all feeds into their work as their work feeds into our work. So it is great to be around talented people, on stage and off stage, committed, talented people, and genuinely considerate people.

We sometimes, particularly in the Church, looking at the entertainment world, think that everyone does not care about other people. But they are a community. It is a tight community. Theatre is a spiritual experience, which is why there is that human connection made. And of course, that is what happens on stage between the audience and the actor.

INTERVIEWER: My experience is that the best people in the field really are not obsessed with ego.

ECKERN: They are whole. What happens is that what we see is what people consider news, so we see celebrity, and we see in news all their failings. We all have failings -- they just do not get in the paper, unless you get a bad review.

But the thing that I find most frustrating is lack of preparation; that will happen. Also, I am not real comfortable around negative attitudes. Because I do have an influence on who works for us and who does not, I say, "I do not want to be around that dark cloud."

I bring those who have light, and people come to our theatre and say, "This is a special place." There is a light here; there is a spirit here that we do not feel anywhere else. For me, that is what we are trying to do and for me, church is wherever I am. And they may not necessarily know what that is, but I do. And so I say we have got to keep doing what we are doing, if that is what makes the difference.

INTERVIEWER: How have you balanced career and family?

ECKERN: You have a family that supports you. I travel and I am probably out of town somewhere between eight and ten weeks a year, just completely out of town. And my wife says that in the summer I am pretty much out of town for ten weeks then as well because I am always at the theatre.

But, again, in the early years, because you are trying to make your mark, you try to say, "Look, I am here. I am available. I am committed!" Not to the sacrifice of your family, because that is part of who you are, and what makes you different as the artist that you are, but there were sacrifices in that regard -- long hours, and there are still long hours.

In the summer, my days are ten to sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, but what I do is make sure the Church provides a balance. So, you do not get all consumed with your work. You say, this is what I have got to do, but I have got to do my home teaching. We have family home evening, we have family prayer, we have scripture study together -- my family has read the Book of Mormon three times together. And it is a mindset -- it is wherever I am, it is with me. I am not one way at church, one way at home, and one way at work, I am consistent. Consistent as in there is a reverence in everything.

INTERVIEWER: I talked to some of your children yesterday and it sounds like you have also brought them in to experience it with you.

ECKERN: They have been coming to the theatre since they were babies. My daughter came two weeks after she was born and watched productions in my arms. They have been around the theatre. It is not a foreign world to them, it is just as normal as normal can be.

INTERVIEWER: So your work is not separate from the family? You pull the family in as well?

ECKERN: Yes. If nothing else, just to come and see the shows. Then, as they have gotten older, my daughter worked in our box office for four years, and my son had his first job this summer working for us as a production assistant and a driver.

You know, that is really a leap there, hiring your eighteen-year-old son to drive actors and staff to the airport and back to the different places that we take them. But he learned a lot and it was a great experience because in that instant he got to see me, and see things, and listen to the actors. They would talk about me or talk about things and he said, "Dad, I see you in a new light." "Really?" I said, "What light is that?" And he said, "Well, you are a leader and you solve problems." "Yeah, I guess so."

INTERVIEWER: And you mentioned that yesterday.

ECKERN: I think it really opened up his eyes. He has been with a youth acting troupe does Shakespeare mostly, and he has had some success with that. He went to Cedar City and won a scholarship there for competition, and that was his first time out of the gate. He is watching and he is listening and he is very spiritual too, and very knowledgeable in the gospel. Right now if you ask him what his major is, he told his mother that it is Missionary Prep. He has figured that out now.

But just like any career, you have got to pay attention to the balance, and President Hinckley has taught us that over and over again. There are times when you need to be honest in your work and give your all there, but then you have to make sure that you are available to your family. There have been times when I have been out of town where we have prayed over the phone -- it is a resource and I use every resource possible.

INTERVIEWER: How and why did you choose to work in this field?

ECKERN: How does anyone choose to work in this field? I think if you're in tune with the Spirit it guides you to where you are supposed to be. I look back on times before I was in the Church as well, the Spirit was in my life, not in the same way that that constant companionship is now, but it was still there. I look back on those things that happened and every step along the way led me until it was time for me to know the restored gospel. Okay, now it is time for this and now it is time for that. So, the how is I just followed the promptings. They said do this and it just feels right.

INTERVIEWER: But you were also willing to follow the Spirit and see opportunities and take them.

ECKERN: That is exactly it. In those opportunities, you do not ask if you have time to do it, but you will do it because you will never have that kind of opportunity again. You will say, I do not have the time, but you have got to. When opportunities come along, do not be fearful. Go ahead. Go forward. You are going to be okay. As we are taught about following the Spirit, we are told be bold, go forward in faith, and the Spirit will be there and the Lord will take care of you. If you stumble, it is okay. You can get back up and regroup and figure out what you can learn from that as well.

There have been times in my twenty-four seasons, the last twenty-five years, where I have wanted to quit a lot of times. You will have someone in your face venting and you are the recipient of that. The reason I lasted as long as I did was I can take it.

That is why the person would vent at me, because they knew they were safe. Then I learned, I will never be like that because I do not want somebody to feel or have to go through what I had to go through, but that is the life lesson that I had to learn.

When I had someone that had done that to me and that was working for me, the director, I could say, we do not do that here. And you do not use language like that.

INTERVIEWER: And that was enough?

ECKERN: That was enough. When my predecessor retired he said, "What used to be the most important thing to me where the tasks, the production was the most important thing. Then I realized that it is people which are the most important." And then he finished his speech and everyone said how wonderful it was and he came over to me privately and gave me a hug and said, "I learned that from you." And I said "Wow! Who knew?" But that always was my push, even when I was not in the driver's seat – it was that you have got to pay attention to these people, they are important.

Then once I had been in it, in terms of it, I discovered that in order for me to have balance in my life, to be able to have a family, to be able to pursue the many things I wanted, I was not going to be an actor. And that was fine. I am going to have my own theatre company, and that is how I will act.

You are always accountable to somebody so you are never ultimately the one who is in charge, except there are jobs or positions you have where you have more control over your schedule and over your life. My colleague who produces at the St. Louis Muni says, "I can't attend such a meeting, I've got to go to a soccer game for my kid." Or "My son is playing a soccer game so I . . ." and others, who are not members of the Church, recognize the importance of family.

It took me a lot of years to get to a place where I can say, "This is my schedule I have to go do this, so schedule the meeting here." I did not have control until five years ago to say, "I am not available, I have to go do this." There have been times when I have been able to cut out and fulfill callings, very demanding callings and my work did not suffer and my callings did not suffer. And as I look at my family, they have not suffered too much.

INTERVIEWER: Any other advice you would give to a student?

ECKERN: Well, what I used to say is "Do not go into the business, it is too hard, it is just too much of a struggle," but I have come to discover that if that is what you really want to do, then that is what you should do. So I do not ever say that anymore, what I say is make sure that you are in close communication with your Heavenly Father, and then He will reveal to you what you are meant to do. Then follow that. Follow it boldly and follow it confidently. And learn from every experience and you will do well. That is it.